



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The Myth of “Scotland’s Historic Tradition of Free University Education” Revisited

Citation for published version:

Cairns, JW, *The Myth of “Scotland’s Historic Tradition of Free University Education” Revisited*, 2014, Web publication/site, Edinburgh Legal History Blog. <<http://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2014/02/02/the-myth-of-scotlands-historic-tradition-of-free-university-education-revisited/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Cairns, J. (Author). (2014). The Myth of “Scotland’s Historic Tradition of Free University Education” Revisited. Edinburgh Legal History Blog.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The Myth of "Scotland's Historic Tradition of Free University Education" Revisited

Posted on 02/02/2014 by John Cairns

The Website of the Scottish National Party still states the following:

Supporting Our Students

"One of the very first acts of the new SNP Government was to restore Scotland's historic tradition of free education by abolishing back door tuition fees in the form of the graduate endowment." <http://www.snp.org/vision/smarter-scotland/supporting-our-students>

As your blogger pointed out over a year ago, whatever may be the merits of "free" university education, the historical claim is untrue. See <http://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2013/01/08/the-myth-of-a-centuries-old-tradition-of-free-university-education-in-scotland/>

In the SNP Government's doorstopper *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*, they have wisely eschewed the direct claim, though they still use a rhetoric of "restoration", at p. 188: "This government has restored free access to higher education to Scottish domiciled undergraduate students" The reader might even ponder on the extent to which the Scottish universities are actually funded by the Scottish government, as the relevant part of this document might suggest, and how much by fee income from overseas students and students from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Your blogger was moved to return to this subject by an amusing quotation from *The Scotsman* in 1934 that he came across in the course of recent research. Robert Munro, Lord Alness, was honoured with a dinner on his retirement (Lord Alness Honoured, *The Scotsman*, 31 Jan. 1934, p. 13). A son of the manse, educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and the University of Edinburgh, Alness – not the most attractive of characters – reminisced about his life and career. He talked of his university days: "In those days professors were paid by fees, and as, on the day preceding the opening of the session, he saw their desks overflowing with pound notes, some of which were being stuffed in their ample pockets, he decided that – God willing – he would be a professor." Lord Alness was not quite right, the professors also gained a salary.

But, in 1889, half of the income of the Professor of Civil Law came in the form of a 5 guinea fee paid to him for his course directly by each student; a student taking the course for a second time only paid 3 guineas. The Professor's salary was £250; he could count on another £250 in fees. He thus earned the very large sum of £500 per annum. The fees were very important to the professors, and very elaborate arrangements for sharing had to be made if one died during the academic year.

It is worth remembering that "free" university education, in the sense of having tuition fees paid by Local Education Authorities, including the SED and its successors, is a UK policy from after the Second World War, with maintenance grants to cover support and fees created under the Conservative Government's Education Act of 1962. Were your Blogger a flippant person, he might well comment that the SNP's policy is the restoration of the fifty-year old one of Harold Macmillan and Sir Alec Douglas-Home.

Your Blogger is very sympathetic to the Robbins Principle that university places "should be available to all ... qualified for them by ability and attainment" enshrined in the report commissioned by the Conservative

Government in 1961. But in days of mass rather than elite education, better arguments are required than a rhetoric of return to a mythical golden age.

Google Analytics

This entry was posted in [Legal History](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

Proudly powered by [WordPress](#).